

## ***Bartian Theology: Mission and the Simpsons***

### **ABSTRACT**

*The Simpsons* is a television phenomenon, a show that has had unprecedented success, draws a wide audience and has remarkable depth to its cultural portrayal. This essay examines the way God and Christianity are presented on *The Simpsons* and considers what insights into our society we may draw from it and what Christian responses might be made. An understanding of satire and a grasp of 'Bartian theology' afford a deeper appreciation of this popular cartoon.

*The Simpsons* is the longest running cartoon in America. It is centred round the Simpson family, who live in a fictitious American town: father Homer, the over-weight nuclear plant worker; mother Marge, the housewife and community do-gooder; Bart the 10-year old anarchist and vandal; Lisa the 8-year old super-achiever, feminist, vegetarian and social activist; baby Maggie; and grandfather Abe, garrulous senior-citizen bore.<sup>1</sup>

G. Waller observes that unlike earlier sit-coms, especially *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*, *The Simpsons* moves far afield of domestic settings to provide a running satiric commentary on the institutions of post-1980s America - the workplace, church, school, television, the sites of leisure etc.<sup>2</sup> Fox network has aimed its demographic sights at the (bi-racial) blue collar end of

1 G. Bowler, 'God and *The Simpsons*: The Religious Life of an Animated Sitcom' <http://www.cnaz.ab.ca/Simpsons.htm>

2 G.A. Waller, 'The Simpsons Survey The Wasteland', *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies* 1 (1994), p. 20.

the spectrum.<sup>3</sup> *Married...With Children* (also of Fox) and *The Simpsons* make a significant shift from 1960's T.V. families. This type of comedy, observes H. Himmelstein, reflects a world decidedly different from its 1950s and 1960s predecessors: The 'Great American Dream' as portrayed by the mythified earlier television comedy has soured. What was a television era of 'father knows best' is quite the opposite in these 1990s television families.<sup>4</sup>

The Simpson family characterize life with all its joys and struggles. They grapple with everyday issues, often with mixed success. The following three quotes each capture a description of *The Simpsons*, providing insight into America's most popular TV family.

The Simpson children wrestle with problems like peer pressure and their own lack of self-understanding while getting sincere but useless - perhaps even damaging - advice from their parents.<sup>5</sup>

The dirty secret at the heart of *The Simpsons* as art is that the show's family member characters, despite everything, deeply love each other and the life they share...the show's creation is motivated by a genuine and non-condescending love of the common people. Well, that and merchandising.<sup>6</sup>

No one would mistake Homer Simpson and his family for saints. In many ways, in fact, they are quintessentially weak, good-hearted sinners who rely on their faith - but only when absolutely necessary.<sup>7</sup>

3 D.D. Collum, '...Because He Made So many of Them: *The Simpsons*, Fox TV, and a fanfare for the common people', *Sojourners* 20(9) (1991), p. 38.

4 H. Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind* (Westport: Praeger, 1994) p. 132.

5 V.A. Rebeck, 'Recognizing Ourselves in *The Simpsons*,' *The Christian Century*, 107(20), (1990), p. 662.

6 Collum p. 39.

7 M.I. Pinsky, 'The Gospel According to Homer', *Orlando Sentinel* - [http://orlandosentinel.com/opinion/081599\\_simpsonsx\\_11.htm](http://orlandosentinel.com/opinion/081599_simpsonsx_11.htm)

### The Significance of Satire

Because *The Simpsons* is soaked through and through with American culture, it manages to operate as both sit-com and as a social satire.<sup>8</sup> Describing *The Simpsons* requires a reflection on this genre. The way one views the programme will greatly affect how one perceives its message and responds to it.

Learning to recognise and appreciate different genres of film, their particular styles and conventions, will help audiences become more 'visuate'.... One of the major consequences of not understanding genres is that audiences find it hard to grasp what values are being probed or presented in the film or whether there are any.<sup>9</sup>

Himmelstein discusses the significance of comedy. His description is particularly relevant. Comedy addresses the immediate life conditions of the society in which it is produced. It may do this through lovable, often absurd individual characters who prompt us to ask, 'How will this impossible misfit react to a situation with which we are familiar?' Comedy may confront us, through satire or irony, as it addresses our collective fears and concerns regarding the constraints placed on the human spirit by oppressive institutions or outmoded customs.<sup>10</sup> This is exactly what *The Simpsons* attempts to do.

Waller notes that one of the more specific targets of *The Simpsons* is the 'bland righteousness of Christian fundamentalism.'<sup>11</sup> This has resulted in a damning critique by many Christians. Yet we might to some degree accept *The Simpsons'* portrayal of religion, understanding it within the genre of satire, though questioning it on a number of issues. Moreover, our critique can go beyond the boundaries of satire,

8 Waller p. 19.

9 P. Malone, *Movie Christs and Antichrists* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 11.

10 H. Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind* (Westport: Praeger, 1994) p. 113.

11 Waller p. 20.

realizing a deeper significance to the way God and Christianity is portrayed. B. Scott speaks of this significance:

If the way we depict the world and humanity implicitly conjures up an image of God, then the way movies depict humanity in the world will mirror assumptions about God, whether present, absent, or even dead.<sup>12</sup>

### **Bartian Theology: *The Theological Implications of an American Satire***

There are many who strongly argue that *The Simpsons* is pro-religion. The Simpsons are one of the few TV families that go to church every week. As a family they regularly pray, prayer is almost always answered and their faith has a frequent place in their lives.<sup>13</sup> The good guys almost always win; one of the most positive characters is an evangelical Christian. This argument is particularly strong when satire is understood. Bowler observes that on *The Simpsons* Christianity is made fun of – judgmentalism, hypocrisy, the commercialism of Christmas ('In honour of the birth of our saviour, Try-N-Save is open all Christmas'), the Christian family etc. As satires go, observes Bowler, the criticisms made on *The Simpsons* are not overly harsh and indeed most Christians would find much truth in them. Religion gets off much more lightly, he adds, than the nuclear power industry or lawyers.<sup>14</sup>

It is the show's express purpose to take jabs at society, why should Christianity be exempt?

Professor Bowler contended that the show 'takes religion's place in society seriously enough to do it the honour of making fun of it.' Despite its legitimate criticisms the show is trashed among the

12 B.B. Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) p. 99.

13 'God and Christianity and Christians are more a part of the Simpson's daily lives than any other prime-time network series, at least shows not specifically devoted to religion'. - Pinsky.

14 Bowler, 'God and *The Simpsons*'.

faithful, he contended, because they don't get its satirical humour.<sup>15</sup>

M. Scully, the series' executive producer, states: 'We try to represent people's honest attitudes about religion.'<sup>16</sup> This 'honesty' has an 'in your face' edge to it and can easily be understood as scathing.

Asked by Bart what his religious beliefs are, Homer answers, 'You know, the one with all the well meaning rules that don't work in real life. Uh, Christianity.' Flanders questions his faith when his home and business is destroyed, comparing himself to Job: 'Why me Lord? Where have I gone wrong? I've always been nice to people! I don't drink or dance or swear! I've even kept kosher just to be on the safe side! I've done everything the Bible says; even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff! What more could I do?'

Satire, by nature, presents a pessimistic view of society, and Christianity is therefore portrayed in a cynical and distrusting light. As much as we may understand the intent and role of satire, Christians are not without justification in questioning the show's value. But before we change the channel, what is there to learn from the way God and Christianity is presented?

Scully's 'honest attitudes to religion' show us how Christianity is perceived by society - American society at least. Dependency on God is a last-resort mentality for the Simpson family. Outside of crises and meal-time prayer, religion is a grudging Sunday morning event, where football is a preferable option. This is a reflection of 'American nominalism' where religion is a cultural practice with little significance. The daily and non-negotiable need of a god, least of all Jesus, has no place in this society.

15 Bowler quoted in L. Sillars, 'The Last Christian TV Family in America', *Alberta Report*, <http://albertareport.com/23arcopy/23a45cpy/2345ar03.htm>.

16 Scully, M. quoted in Pinsky

God perceived as a last-resort refuge reflects an inadequate soteriology. The Simpsons believe in a physical heaven and hell, but the requirement for getting into heaven is a works based religion: Flanders leads a good life and therefore expects a fair go from God; Bart is bad and therefore ends up in hell; when the Sunday school teacher is asked how one may avoid damnation the answer is 'obeying the ten commandments.' It is no surprise that Jesus Christ has no place in *The Simpsons*' discussions and commentaries on religion.

So, although *The Simpsons* is satire and takes jabs at religion, the very jabs we laugh at portray a theology very distant from basic Christian thought. There is a huge God-Jesus disparity. Homer's 'well meaning rules that don't work out in real life,' show an awareness of what is right and wrong, but the idea of a saving Christ has no place in Simpson Christianity.

A number of possible conclusions can be made here: a saving Christ is considered too 'cultish' to receive satirical comment; Jesus Christ is a 'sacred cow' of American culture too holy to be made fun of; American religion has a poor understanding of the Christian God, particularly of Christ.

An episode of South Park, the epitome of bad taste TV, featured Jesus and Satan in a boxing ring. Satan was an enormous muscular red-coloured man: Jesus a small, pathetic white-coloured man. Jesus made the winning blow, but as Satan lay on the floor his eyes opened, and the crowd jeered 'he's faking it, he's faking it.'

*The Simpsons*, despite its controversial satire, is mainstream television. Jesus is therefore likely to have been left alone because he does carry a 'sacred cow' perception, not only amongst evangelical Christians but also among American nominalists.

It also may be true that American religion presents a poor understanding of the Christian God. A works-based theology is made fun of because that's the perception the church makes to society. The Simpson God is very distant, appealed to only in crisis, and is appeased by good works. The basic Christian understanding of an incarnate God, characterized by love and

grace, whose actions are forever toward his creation is quite contrary to Simpson religion.

Simpson religion also reflections of Kantian philosophy. This type of religion consists not in the knowing or considering of what God does or has done for our salvation but in what we must do to be worthy of it. Salvation is based on works rather than faith, and religion becomes a matter of ethics and morals. (For instance, in the show based on 'Thou shalt not steal' not stealing is presented both as a moral principle to live to and as a way of avoiding hell.)

Matt. Groening, the show's creator, says: 'I guess if there's any underlying theme to my work, it's that your leaders don't always have your best interests at heart. When people are telling you what to do and how to think, maybe you should take a second look.'<sup>17</sup> This aspect of programme has particular significance in this discussion. *The Simpsons* breeds mistrust of authority figures. Consider Mayor Quimby, Principal Skinner, Rev. Lovejoy, Mr Burns and even Homer Simpson - these authority figures are all notably weak, dishonest and/or greedy characters.

Again, Kantian connections can be made. Newbigin observes that Kant's famous slogan *Sapere aude* (Dare to Know), was a summons to the autonomous human reason to trust its own powers and to dare to question the accepted traditions.<sup>18</sup> *The Simpsons* is a reflection of a culture that fosters mistrust and autonomy. No institution, authority, way of living or belief system is above question.

So, 'if the way we depict the world and humanity does conjure up an image of God,' what does a mistrust in authority say about God, Christianity and the Bible. For evangelical Christians, God, the Bible and the Church have principal

17 M. Groening, quoted in K. Hamilton, 'You're not in Springfield now, pizza boy' *New Zealand Herald* 25 September 1999.

18 L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) p. 81.

authority. A *Simpsons* attitude to life will continually mistrust any such authority.

Collum asserts that *The Simpsons* is a programme for the 'common people'.<sup>19</sup> It is no surprise it has been popular in New Zealand. Tim Lester observes that 'New Zealand was colonized by egalitarian commoners who came here to escape the hated British class system....Ruthlessly egalitarian New Zealand resists leadership and the elevation of any individual.'<sup>20</sup> *Simpson* culture finds significant parallels in Kiwi culture: leadership and authority is questioned and mistrusted; success is not recognised or is belittled and mistrusted.

*The Simpsons* reflects and encourages an anti-faith culture. An attitude that questions and mistrusts authority is hardly fertile ground for belief. This *Simpsons* approach to leadership and authority presents enormous barriers to having faith in, and accepting the authority of, God, the Bible and the church.

### A Christian Response

How are we to respond to this? Can we view *The Simpsons* as a harmless television programme, one that we can laugh at and otherwise simply ignore? The level to which we respond to *The Simpsons* depends on how much we believe television affects us. Effects research is a controversial topic. There is considerable contention over how much, if at all, television shapes our thoughts and governs our actions.<sup>21</sup> Yet, despite the indeterminate results of effects research, there is a consensus among many people that television has a significant role in shaping our thoughts and actions.

19 Collum, pp. 38-39

20 Tim Lester, quoted in Bruce Patrick, *Some Thoughts on Leadership in Kiwiland* 23 September 1999, unpublished paper.

21 S. Livingstone provides a critique of effects research. She notes the way television affects its audience is the most researched area in media studies. There has, however, been much dismay over the inability to offer clear conclusions regarding the causal impact of television.



Television is a molder of the soul's geography. It builds up incrementally a psychic structure of expectation.... In the eyes of young people does the public weight of what is seen on television count for more than what they see in their private world as a model for 'how things are done'? Indeed, do adults themselves gain a sense of what counts as acceptable adult behavior from the public media?<sup>22</sup>

But what if there is some important reality in the old proverb, 'Seeing is believing'? Does the 'voluntary suspension of disbelief' to which we must consent if we are to be entertained affect us in ways we ignore?<sup>23</sup>

If television, then, does shape our perceptions, we must take seriously the Simpson portrayal of God and Christianity. Although God is present and sometimes plays a meaningful role in *The Simpsons*, the prevailing image of God is poor. How should we respond to an image of God as distant, unloving, and by whom good works rather than faith is demanded? More than this, how should we respond to this image of God being formed in *Simpsons* viewers?

Should *The Simpsons* just be banned? Hardly. At one level, we must see the programme as satire, enjoy its humour, and learn from the image of God and church presented. *The Simpsons* is the most culturally literate show on television,<sup>24</sup> and excellent entertainment. We must not be afraid of a few religious jabs.<sup>25</sup> *The Simpsons* should not be banned because of its portrayal of God and Christianity. It has much to say to the church.

22 M. Novak, 'Television Shapes the Soul' in D. Cater (ed.) *Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism* (New York: Praeger, 1975) pp. 10, 12.

23 M.R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) p. x.

24 Bowler, quoted in Sillars.

25 There may be other reasons for not watching *The Simpsons*: like the poor role models presented to children and the effects they make on children's behaviour. This, however, is outside the boundaries of discussion for this essay.

So, if we are going to watch *The Simpsons*, how do we respond to a dysfunctional image of God being formed in its viewers? One approach is to exploit it as an excellent means of communication. *The Simpsons* could be used in many church settings (sermons, small group discussions) as a vehicle for discussing God, church, faith, family etc. The positive aspects of *Simpson* religion could be used as a starting point: church attendance; prayer; the acknowledgment of a god etc.

The Simpsons are also one of the very few TV families to go to church every week, even consulting their minister in times of crisis. The religion they get there is a pretty lame K-Mart evangelicalism, but it does express the characters' striving, amid chaos and drift, for a moral anchor and a larger sense of life's meaning.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that television lacks a positive presentation of Christianity. Genuine Christian programming that reaches a secular audience is a failed occupation. The challenge awaits to be fulfilled! At this point Bowler serves a warning:

If [*The Simpsons*] is among the most religious programs on television it can only mean that religion is very badly served on that medium. Overtly Christian programming has failed to find an audience among secular viewers and... may even be counter-productive in effectively reaching the unchurched.... Religion's invisibility in prime-time programming speaks volumes about how the entertainment industry views its place on the scale of human activity and until that changes we may have to make do with Ned Flanders as our televised spiritual mentor.<sup>27</sup>

Another response is to realise that beyond *The Simpsons'* animated characters a view of society is portrayed. How do we respond to this knowledge of society? We could choose an aspect of *The Simpsons*, e.g. anti-faith themes, and actively live out an authentic Christian position - one that has complete faith in a loving and saving God, incarnate in Jesus Christ. This is

26 Collum p. 39.

27 Bowler, God and *The Simpsons*.

subversive. We do not need to publicly decry the *Simpson* God, but be activated to mission by modeling correct Christian views. *The Simpsons* may have a mega-audience, and our attempts at mission through living a Christian life may seem futile. But a 'think globally, act locally' mentality is valuable to grass roots Christian efforts.

This approach is particularly useful in the way we practice church. *The Simpsons* presents church as boring and irrelevant. This must challenge us to present church to our society as dynamic, relevant to daily life, and based in community and care. The real life actions of a caring community are going to have much more impact on a single person than an animated satire. Our practice of church can also be motivated by the knowledge that we live in a society that is suspicious of authority. This knowledge may govern how we make decisions, communicate and implement change. Successful models of congregational government would be particularly helpful.

When we reflect on how best to do mission, what *The Simpsons* says about society has much to say to us. What message should the church promote in a world that has an anti-faith bias, misunderstands salvation to be through good works, and views God as distant and unloving? Whatever our approach, the message must be Christ. Reflection on '*Simpson* society' pushes us to realise that Jesus Christ is missing. It is Jesus who saves, not a good life: an anti-faith bias must be overcome by faith in Christ; the incarnate Jesus reveals to the world a God who is amongst us and characterized by love and grace. This makes God anything but a last resort refuge, who is appealed to only in crisis. Our mission must include an awareness of the human condition, one that asserts the daily and non-negotiable need of Jesus.

But how should this message be communicated in a society that rejects faith and is suspicious of authority? An 'in-your-face' Flanders approach is hardly appropriate. Acceptable characters on *The Simpsons* are those who are 'one of the gang', who will share a drink and a joke, who are not judgmental. The Christian message may be better

communicated by someone that is more like Lenny or Karl (Homer's work mates), than Flanders.

'Minute for minute [*The Simpsons*] is the most entertaining and inventive running commentary on American television around.'<sup>28</sup> The programme is great entertainment and provides immense insight into Western culture. The church has much to learn from the way God and Christianity are portrayed: we need to be challenged to present a positive, relevant and dynamic faith; we need to anchor our faith and mission in Jesus Christ. And if *The Simpsons* teaches us nothing else, before we think too much, we must sit back and laugh, at our world, at the foibles of our faith, or simply at ridiculous animated characters.

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28 Waller p. 21.